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THE LOTUS MAGAZINE

MOVEMENT FOR THE ADVANCEMENT OF
FRENCH ART IN AMERICA

By Gustav Kobbé



THE influence behind the movement ultimately to establish in this country a French museum with its own building in New York and commensurate branches in other cities, is far more powerful than might be supposed from what has been printed in regard to it. Even the recently formed Institut Français Aux Etats Unis with its list of officers, trustees and members of council, fails to convey the possible scope of the plans for a French museum in America, and how powerful its influence may be in creating and conserving here a taste for French painting, sculpture and the arts of decoration. Nor must the exhibition of prints illustrating the history of the city of Paris and recently held in one of the rooms of the American Fine Arts Building, be regarded as anything more than a very small beginning made in order to take advantage of the pressure here of a group of distin-

guished Frenchmen who had come over for the dedication of the Champlain monument.

No; there is behind the movement far more than what has been mentioned, and to divine what it is, one has but think of the official recognition extended to art by the French Government. In France art is not art;—it is Art. The government recognizes, cultivates, developes and rewards it. Its interests engage the attention of one of the ministers of the government. The great Ecole des Beaux Arts, with its Prix de Rome in all departments of art, and its branches, are government institutions. It is true that official support is sometimes accorded to art that is too conventional, too academic and too much of the “recognized” and decorated order. But this very conservatism of government art has led to useful movements of protest and revolution, like that of the Barbizon men against the classicism of their day and that of the impressionists against later academic formulas; movements which in turn have been absorbed and assimilated by the government schools, and become reasons for even further protests and revolutions, as now exemplified by the post-impressionists, cubistes and others. The conservatism that begets discontent makes, in the end, for progress beneficially restrained.

Ordiliness, system—the sequence of many years of applied thought and administration, characterize a government like that of France in its patronage of art. We are apt to think of the Prix de Rome as a reward for students in painting and sculpture only. But, as I have said, it is established for all branches of art, taking that word in its broad, continental

sense. Berlioz, for example, was a Prix de Rome. To foster incipient genius, even if in so doing it be warming the proverbial viper—a revolutionist—in its bosom, is a duty the French Government takes upon itself. Nor does it stop with the Prix de Rome. The Louvre being for the conservation of classic art, it has established the Luxembourg galleries for which it purchases the works of living artists, keeping there the creations of an artist thus honored until ten years after his death, when his work is transferred to the Louvre. In administering the Luxembourg, France is not blind to the art of other countries. The work of artists who are not French is well represented there. On one of its walls there hangs, for example, the greatest portrait of modern times, the Whistler "Mother," which an American museum neglected to acquire when it had the opportunity, but which France promptly bought. Among the earliest works on Whistler were Duret's "Critique d'avant garde," Paris, 1885, and Huysman's "Certains," Paris, 1889 (G. Moreau, Dégas, Cheret, Whistler, Rops, etc.) A "Whistler Album" was published in Paris in 1892. As far back as 1863, when in England and America Whistler's name was a byword for all the "queer" and unintelligible in art, he received a medal at the Paris Salon, and long before he received equal recognition elsewhere, France made him a Chevalier and then an officer of the Legion of Honor. These facts are mentioned merely to show that while preserving her own independence toward art and carefully watching over her own artist children, she has been a kind, even a solicitous foster-mother to those of other countries.

Thus, France as a nation, as a government, fosters art, nor regards her own borders as limitations upon her activities in this respect. It is this attitude of France toward artistic culture, this declination to rest content with the progress of art in her capital and provinces, that gives to the movement for establishing a French museum in this country its great importance. Elsewhere in this magazine will be found an account of the origin and some details of the plan of this movement. But throughout the entire initiative one cardinal fact stands forth:—Behind the movement is France. The French government with its vast art resources to draw upon and place at its disposal through the loan of art objects, even the most precious, for exhibitions, is an active participant in this altruistic enterprise, and so amazing in extent are the art collections of the French government that France can send loan exhibitions to the French museum and its branches here from the museum of the Louvre, the Gobelins, Sevres, Cluny, Carnavalet, Versailles and the museums in Lyons, Tours, Limoges, without any of these institutions suffering more than temporary inconvenience if, indeed, any.

Americans who appreciate what they owe France and look back with affection to the country in which they made their studies, are active in this movement for a French museum in America. But behind it also stands France, that radiating sun of art ever ready to warm every germ of promise into life and fertility.